

Erin Loree's Hyperbolic Abstractions

Written by: Meraj Dhir

Erin Loree is a young, accomplished painter whose exhibition *Midnight Bloom* opens at the Jamie Angell gallery this week.

Loree's paintings range from medium sized to large, brightly coloured, gestural abstractions that border on figurative allusion. They nod to that most Canadian of all genres: the landscape.

Over the past few years Angell Gallery has hosted a true efflorescence in contemporary painting. From the geometrically precise landscape works of Gavin Lynch, and the psychically charged interiors of Bradley Wood, to the highly sought figurative debasing and detouring of Tom Thompson by Kim Dorland, Jamie Angell has featured some of the most exciting painting happening today at his eponymous gallery.

With the work of Erin Loree, the gallery once again sets the stage for us to consider the viability of painting today. Loree's pictures are both broad and flashy while simultaneously being subtle and allusive. Calling them "abstract" doesn't do them justice since Loree's canvases flirt delicately with repetitive motifs and patterns that are suggestive of figuration -- though never in any sort of literal or clearly identifiable way.

Kim Dorland's two group shows, clustered around the theme of a "return to painting," were also hosted by the gallery. Loree's work was featured in the second show alongside several accomplished artists. But what especially arrested me in these shows is not how they staged a celebration of the painting medium, but rather how the shows displayed an almost ecstatic embrace of a return to *figuration*. In the ironically titled "I <3 Paint 2" Loree's work was perhaps the most abstract. Nevertheless, the artist never capitulated to full abstraction in any sort of robust or final way.

Yet, part of Loree's considerable talent is the way she engages the viewer, encouraging the audience to supply the "beholder's share" to complete the painting. In the current show, *Midnight Bloom*, several of Loree's pictures share the curvilinear "halo," motif that declares the perceptual field of the pictures by internally framing the background. Many viewers read this pattern as the mouth of a cave, or mountain-scapes in the background of the picture space. For a casual visitor who wandered into the gallery while the lighting was being set, Loree's, *The Meeting* suggested the undulating horseshoe motif of the "storm-trooper" helmet from the recent *Force Awakens* film. While *Star Wars* is probably the furthest reference in Loree's mind, this allusion to a kind of abstraction that

somehow sublimates or responds to a contemporaneous space age is not entirely inapposite to the workings of abstraction today. The reference also highlights the inhuman and the inanimate in the squeegeed, commercial slickness of Loree's variegated brush work.

Back when Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis and Frank Stella were painting their "colour-field" paintings, broad bold fields of pure color that asserts the dematerialization of the brushstroke, critic Leo Steinberg provocatively claimed that the slick application of paint in these pictures has as much to do with abstraction as it referred to the glossy surfaces of the contemporaneous, mass produced automobiles in Detroit. Steinberg's essays collected under the title "Other Criteria," are nothing less than a radical riposte to Greenberg and a reassessment of the entire history of European western easel painting. In essays such as "The Eye is a Part of the Mind," Steinberg implicitly attacks the rigid strictures of Clement Greenberg's modernist criticism. He advanced a more heterogeneous and diverse scope with which to consider advanced painting. Paintings are *conceptual* as much as they are just *optical*. In his notion of the "flatbed" picture-plane, inspired by the works of Johns and Rauschenberg, Steinberg asserts pictures can be understood as objects strewn across a table that we relate through free association in our minds, as much as they are illusionistic or purely optical. Steinberg's theory gains force when we note that many of Pollock's canvases were painted while flat on the ground and only first viewed from above, like the top of a table, and only then hung vertically. In the post-historical, postmodern present, an abstract painting can simultaneously resist mass culture through strategies of abstraction and negation as much as it can parody Star Wars or open itself up to associations with mass culture.

A notable feature of Loree's paintings is that while certainly abstract, they are replete with different types of painterly mark-making. The halo-like effect of the cave motif is amplified by how Loree is able to dissimulate her own facture. She produces an almost airbrushed lightness with her application of color and paint. While not articulating a storm trooper helmet *per se*, this delicate staining does suggest a nimbus like structure evocative of German Romantic landscapes and the spiritual, transcendentalist associations that motif implies. Or, maybe, could we read these spaces against their painterly grain and see something of the throbbing white, glowing fields that evoke the ubiquitous digital screens we all spend our lives absent-mindedly gazing at? Look at the pulsating white triangular area at the bottom of *Grotto*, where white paint borders and frosty blue accents pulsate with the luminosity of a fluorescent screen.

Loree balances fields of broad color with painterly areas where brushwork is starkly affirmed with loose and chancy application. However, two blue bands that occupy the lower register of the masterful *Entanglement* appear simply as broad fields of post-painterly color. To an almost virtuosic degree Loree delights in her

exuberant painting while demonstrating the diversity available through the abstract painterly *tache*. In *Grotto*, the application of white paint is applied as thick as icing on a cake that drips from the upper edge, and threatens to efface the entire composition with a deluge of glutinous, syrupy paint. But it is here too that Loree has built up the working of orange and yellow paint against bands of complementary blue. Paint is applied at the center of the canvas to approximate an almost relief like tactility, protruding robustly from the surface of the picture.

Note the suggestive titles of Loree's work. Often they stage an "encounter" of one sort or another: "*The Meeting*," "*Entanglement*," "*Mirroring*," "*Tug-O-War*," or liminal, transitional spaces suggestive of intimate passage and abstract spatiality: "*Grotto*," "*The Way Inside*," "*Tavern Madness*" "*Scrape*." I think these titles allude to something primordial, even atavistic about Loree's technique as much as they cue the viewer to engage affectively and viscerally. Note the scale and the subtle symmetries of the works that address our presence before them bodily.

One possible way to understand Loree's suite of works from the *Midnight Bloom* exhibit is that they contain a surrealist impulse that performs a de-structuring and de-figuring of form. Loree's work bares much resemblance to the Quebec automatistes: Jean-Paul Riopelle and Paul-Émile Borduas. The rhythmic curves and zig-zags that populate her paintings could be read as an enlargement or magnification of the automatist surrealist brushstroke or all-over line. Moreover, chance operations are activated through Loree's squeegee and palette knife techniques. Loree does not work from any *a priori* design or study, but rather paints *relationally* and in the moment, as each brushstroke or device is activated in response to what has gone before.

This automatist tendency situates Loree's work somewhere on the divide between abstraction and surrealism. In this reading the paintings confront us as psychically opaque spaces that enact scenes of perversion and desire, fear and anxiety. Look at the painterly struggle at the bottom right corner of *Tug-o-War*. Here, pink fleshy paint has been applied with an almost grotesque vigor. One senses something like the traditional nude, violently drowned in a sea of waves: *figure* collapsed into *ground*.

Loree is virtuosic as a colorist. Her pictures exude a bright chromatic temperature and embrace strong contrasts and clashes. I am impressed by the subtle boldness of red in *Grotto*. Around the optical buzz created by the proximity of the complementary pairing orange-blue, Loree's application of a pure, almost obscene red registers vividly. At the top, the broad application of a traffic sign yellow gives the work an earthy feel. Even in the modestly sized *Crystal Ball*, the painterly application of a muted green seems to serve as the cornerstone of the whole picture.

I think the question of whether these are landscapes or how far they refer to the landscape is open-ended. Loree is well aware of the threat that her work may spill into mere decoration, or even worse *ornamentation*. Whether we ourselves hold Greenberg's bias against "good design" I think the rhythm of Loree's pictures and the integrity of their surface resist this charge. These pictures contain in themselves the pictorial rhythm of ascension, of bursting forth and even assaulting our gaze while they caress it. This is the sadism and struggle implied by Freud in the association of the erotic with the death-drive where the former strives towards sexual ecstasy and creation, while the latter strives to return us to inanimate matter. Freud Rather than pretty views, Loree's strategies are more evocative of geological, tectonic and meteorological forces. These are vigorous, gestural, muscular paintings They affirm the bold *autographic* gesture of abstract expressionism even as they deface it unlike much Zombie formalism today that repeats the austere, stringent narcissism of past art.

There is a playfulness in the the warping, buckling rhythms of Loree's brushwork. Note the rhyming figure eight structures in the magisterial *Out of the Deep*. Here the ribbons of paint describe a Leviathan like animation of oceanic force. There is a spontaneity to this composition that reenacts something like "divine play," the *sportive* quality of the ultimate Brahma in creating the universe.

Whatever associations one brings, one is impressed that an artist of such a young age, and still in the early stages of her formation, has been able to build such an innovative and yet identifiable stylistic profile.